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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

10 July 1984

Apparent Soviet Decision to Withhold Military Transport
Support From the HarvestSummary

There is mounting evidence that the Politburo has decided to withhold most military transport support from this year's grain harvest. Although likely to enhance the military's combat readiness, this move could worsen the usual sizable harvest losses that result from inadequate transport. It is not clear why the Politburo would make this decision, which evidently applies also to future years, but cases can be made for three different explanatory hypotheses. [redacted]

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First, the diversion of military trucks from harvest support could be--as it has been in the past--a signal of impending military operations. [redacted]

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[redacted] the apparent long-term nature of the decision suggests we are witnessing a fundamental change in Soviet harvest support practice rather than a one-time preparation for a planned combat operation or a military contingency. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by the Office of Soviet Analysis. It was written of the Policy Analysis Division with contributions from of the Soviet Economy Division, [redacted] of the Defense Industries Division, and [redacted] of the Theater Forces Division. Comments or questions may be addressed to Chief, Policy Analysis Division, [redacted]

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Second, the Politburo's decision may have been linked to political maneuvering within the leadership. Konstantin Chernenko, who succeeded Yuriy Andropov as General Secretary in February, seems to be a weaker leader who may have perceived a need to win the Soviet military's support. If the decision was contentious, its major opponent is likely to have been Mikhail Gorbachev, the party secretary responsible for agriculture and Chernenko's major political rival. [REDACTED]

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Third, a logical--and in our judgment the strongest--case can be made for the thesis that the decision was reached by consensus, perhaps after years of consideration and preparation. Soviet leaders may have calculated that the step involved relatively little risk in current conditions, i.e. in view of a larger inventory of civilian trucks on farms and available from non-agricultural enterprises and organizations. This explanation fits with the Soviet leadership practice of sharing collectively responsibility for major decisions. Gorbachev, whose political status and power have risen since Andropov's death, may even have initiated the proposal to improve his political standing with the Soviet military. [REDACTED]

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Apparent Politburo Decision

1. There is mounting evidence that the Politburo has decided to withhold most military transport support from this year's Soviet grain harvest:

- Soviet media have reported that on 1 March the Politburo spelled out certain unspecified measures to make "more rational use" of motor transport in support of the harvest.

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[REDACTED]

2. The Politburo's decision comes against a background of longstanding military dissatisfaction over the burden of harvest support.

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Despite efforts to reduce the disruption to training and preparedness, harvest support imposes heavy demands upon the Soviet military. Historically, tens of thousands of military vehicles have been involved each year in harvest operations.

- Last year, as many as 7,000 trucks and 10,000 personnel from the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany were sent to the USSR for harvest operations.
- In 1976, Brezhnev publicly stated that more than 50,000 military vehicles were used to collect and transport the harvest in Kazakhstan alone.
- In 1968, Brezhnev told a Central Committee plenum that about 600,000 trucks had to be mobilized from the national economy to support the harvest. Presumably, this figure included military vehicles as well as non-agricultural civilian transport.

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3. Meanwhile, the agricultural sector has been receiving a steady increase in resources. Between 1970 and 1983 the size of the agricultural truck park increased from 1.1 to 1.7 million units--a more than 50 percent increase. (See Table 1 at annex. In 1980, the latest year for which estimates are available, there were an estimated 800,000 trucks in Soviet military inventories.) In light of agriculture's acquisition of additional resources, the Soviet military leadership may have argued that by 1984 the armed forces were overdue for relief from the burden of harvest support.

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4. Champions of Soviet agriculture, however, certainly would have had powerful arguments for making continued use of military transport. Despite the expansion of truck inventories that has occurred since 1970, the number of trucks under the direct control of the agricultural sector still

amounts to less than half of the goal that the Soviets have apparently set.* Moreover, a large percentage of these trucks are inoperable because they are in need of repair. Discussions of harvest operations in the Soviet media indicate that the leadership remains concerned over the loss of grain and other foodstuffs that results from transport problems. In 1982, when military trucks were still being used for harvest support, a Soviet commission reported that losses and spoilage resulting from inadequate transportation and the unavailability of sufficient local storage amounted to 20 percent of the grain harvest. [redacted]

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5. In light of this concern and the regime's commitment to increase food supplies while minimizing the expenditure of hard currency for imports, it is difficult to understand why the Politburo did not opt for a more gradual cutback in military transport support. Three alternative answers to this question seem plausible:

- The Politburo is withholding the military trucks for a military contingency or for planned combat operations.
- The decision arose from political maneuvering, perhaps from an effort by Chernenko to win the Soviet military's support at the expense of his rival Gorbachev.
- A long-term, consensus policy is being implemented, perhaps proposed by Gorbachev in an effort to increase the self-reliance of the agricultural sector and to improve his prospects of becoming General Secretary.

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Military Contingency?

6. The most alarming--but in our view least likely--explanation of the decision is that the Soviets are withholding military trucks from the harvest in order to

*This estimate is based on Soviet statements such as "farms in the Volga region should have no less than 6.9 freight transportation trucks for every 1,000 hectares of arable land, but have only 3.6." (Ekonomika sel'skogo khozyaystva), no.2, 1983, p.10. The stock of trucks controlled by agricultural enterprises per 1,000 hectares of arable land for the country as a whole was 3.1 at the end of 1982, compared with 2.1 at the end of 1970. [redacted]

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intensify their military operations in Afghanistan or in anticipation of military contingencies related to worsening East-West tensions. Such an interpretation would be consistent with the historical precedent of 1968, when the diversion of trucks from harvest operations helped signal the impending Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. [redacted]

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7. If the Soviets are withholding military trucks from the harvest against a military contingency, Afghanistan could be the focal point of their concern. [redacted]

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8. The decision could also be linked to a deepening concern within official Soviet circles over possible military consequences of US-Soviet tensions. [redacted]

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[redacted] Also, Soviet leaders have emphasized the theme of increased danger of war in their speeches. [redacted]

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Political Maneuvering?

10. It is also possible that the decision, which involves a marked departure from previous practice, arose out of post-Andropov leadership politics. Succession periods typically produce intensified maneuvering as the new party leader begins the process of consolidating his position and his colleagues attempt to enhance their power. In view of his age, health, and apparently negative image within at least middle levels of the Soviet elite, Chernenko may have believed that he needed the support of Ustinov and the military to increase his power. [redacted]

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12. There is also circumstantial evidence to support a hypothesis that a bargain was struck between Chernenko and Ustinov. After initially lukewarm endorsements of Chernenko, Ustinov began to praise Chernenko lavishly in a speech to military officers on 24 February--less than a week before the Politburo decision apparently was taken. Ustinov went even further in his Supreme Soviet election speech four days later, specifically praising Chernenko for contributing to strengthening the country's defense capability and improving the military's combat readiness. [REDACTED]

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13. Shortly before the decision, other military leaders also began endorsing Chernenko's leadership in their speeches and writings. Chief of the General Staff Ogarkov, for example, made the first identification of Chernenko as head of the Defense Council at Army-Navy Day ceremonies on 23 February. The Chief of Rear Services, Marshal Kurkotkin--who is responsible for organizing harvest assistance--was the first Soviet official to describe Chernenko as head of the Defense Council in the Soviet media, and Ustinov has done so as well. In addition, in contrast to its initially cool treatment of Chernenko immediately after Andropov's death, the military newspaper Red Star has recently gone out of its way to burnish Chernenko's military credentials by referring to his "heroic" border guard service. [REDACTED]

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14. Whether or not a deal was struck between Chernenko and the military, a decision to withhold military transport from the harvest could well have been contentious. [REDACTED]

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15. If the March 1984 decision also was a contentious one, Mikhail Gorbachev, the party secretary responsible for agriculture and the Food Program and Chernenko's chief rival for the post of General Secretary after Andropov's death, probably was its major opponent. Chernenko quite possibly still views Gorbachev as a political threat. By striking at agriculture's priority in this way, Chernenko could signal that Gorbachev lacks the power to protect his interests and place him on the spot to bring in the harvest under more difficult conditions. Although Chernenko has been a strong supporter of the consumer and a booster of the Food Program and certainly would not want to risk the harvest, he may have reasoned and argued that Gorbachev had adequate trucks to get the job done. [redacted]

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16. Other than some historical evidence and logical inference there is little basis for speculating on how the other members of the Politburo lined up on the issue of military harvest support. One can, however, assume [redacted] that the members who represented civilian and defense industry, such as party secretaries Romanov and Dolgikh, would have sympathized with the military's desire for relief from harvest support (unless they were forced to provide additional trucks in lieu of military vehicles). For his part, Gorbachev probably could have expected support from some of the regional leaders such as RSFSR Premier Vitaliy Vorotnikov, Ukrainian party boss Vladimir Shcherbitskiy, and Kunayev, who have traditionally depended on military support to help bring in the harvest in their republics. Although the Politburo generally tries to make decisions on a consensus basis, [redacted] controversial decisions can be forced through with the support of the General Secretary. [redacted]

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Consensus, Low-Risk Move?

17. A logical--and in our view, stronger--case could also

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[redacted]

be made for the hypothesis that the decision was reached by consensus in the Politburo and involves less risk than might appear to be the case at first glance. If so, it is likely that Gorbachev initiated the Politburo decision, perhaps with support from Kunayev or other leaders, as a major concession by agriculture to the military and as a way to curry favor with some of his colleagues. Gorbachev could have argued that the provision of additional civilian trucks and other measures taken during his tenure as overseer of agriculture would guarantee that harvest losses would not exceed the high level normal for past years when military transport has been used. He might also have sought a simultaneous promise of additional allocation of vehicles for agriculture in future years, asserting that such allocations would guarantee the continued self-reliance of the agricultural sector. [redacted]

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18. Under this scenario, the decision to relieve the military of its obligation to provide harvest support may have been taken months if not years ago on the basis of reasoned calculation. The decision could have been taken in June 1981, [redacted]

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[redacted] At that time Gorbachev, who was considerably junior to Ustinov, may have acquiesced in a decision to withdraw military support sometime during the current five-year plan. A decision taken at that time, however, could have been deferred because of the dismal harvest that year and subsequent leadership involvement in succession maneuvering. A proposal for 1984 could have been on the table before Andropov fell ill, and its implementation could have been delayed until after his death. The appearance in February of an article by a Kazakh government official in an important economic journal, which suggested that improved efficiency might allow his republic to dispense with harvest support help from industrial and "other enterprises," suggests that the decision may have been in the works before Andropov died. [redacted]

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19. The lack of unusual press discussion of truck support for the harvest lends a degree of plausibility to such a scenario. We would suspect that if such a decision was highly controversial, it would be reflected in the press even if it was not directly discussed. An examination of the Soviet media, however, has revealed no unusual discussion of such issues since March. Even this year's published Council of Ministers directive on harvest preparation is almost identical to those published in past years, suggesting no major publicity effort has been made to compensate for the loss of military harvest support. In one

recent case when the harvest support issue was broached, Belorussian First Secretary Nikolay Slyunkov, indicated that local farms had adequate transport to guarantee the success of gathering the hay crop. [REDACTED]

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20. This hypothesis seems more consistent with the cautious nature of Soviet decisionmaking. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] contentious items are usually deferred for further staff work and that every effort is made to reach a consensus, even in times of international crises. Neither the Politburo nor the military, moreover, would gamble with the harvest. The harvest is crucial to economic well-being, and the military knows that the economy is crucial to military strength. Presumably, however, if Gorbachev announced that military harvest support was no longer needed, Ustinov would be the first to second him. [REDACTED]

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21. The decision, moreover, may be less risky than we have assumed. Since 1970, as noted above, the number of trucks in agricultural inventories has increased by over 50 percent, and the hauling capacity of these trucks has almost doubled (see Table 1). There also have been a number of hints that some headway has been made in making truck support more efficient. A radio commentary after a 17 May Politburo session noted that improvements in the use of trucks for harvest support initiated in the Saratov region and in Kazakhstan had been discussed. The Politburo may have been endorsing their application elsewhere with an eye to improving performance. A Council of Ministers resolution of mid-May also addressed making more efficient use of trucks from the modern Kama truck factory. This decree might have been framed with the view of improving the efficiency of truck support for the harvest. Other similar decisions that could reduce the risk of precipitously withdrawing military support could also have gone unnoticed in the West. [REDACTED]

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Prospects And Implications

22. It is not too late for the Politburo to backtrack on

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[redacted]

its decision if problems arise in bringing in the harvest without military trucks. Soviet leaders could not have accurately predicted the size of the harvest when the initial decision was taken in the Politburo and may still reconsider it. There has been a drought this spring in the Volga region, and the importance of the sizable crop in Kazakhstan--where military support has traditionally played an important role--has therefore increased. Published reports of discussion of transport issues at the 17 May Politburo meeting suggest that the decision may still be under discussion within the leadership. [redacted]

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23. Although the Politburo could subsequently order the military to provide some support to the grain harvest, the longer the delay in doing so, the greater the potential bottlenecks and problems. Evidence to date suggests that no such decision has been taken. [redacted]

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24. If the Politburo's decision stands, there will be some clear winners and losers, depending largely on whether the decision was contentious or was based on consensus. If Ustinov and Chernenko have struck a political deal, the decision could presage a shift in resource allocation in favor of defense, despite Chernenko's continued pro-consumer rhetoric. If the deal was a temporary one, however, and Chernenko feels that Ustinov has already gotten his pay-off, the Food Program may still come out on top in some resource decisions. [redacted]

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25. If the initiative came from Gorbachev, perhaps with some support from regional leaders such as Kunayev, he is running the risk that agriculture and non-agriculture civilian sectors may fail to provide timely and adequate transportation and that above-average losses may occur. At the same time, Gorbachev presumably stands to gain if the effort succeeds. He would have proved himself a capable administrator and probably would have enhanced his credibility with the military. Under this scenario, such a move could only strengthen his chances of eventually succeeding Chernenko as General Secretary. [redacted]

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TABLE 1

USSR: Annual Agricultural Truck Deliveries, Inventories and Hauling Capacities at Yearend, 1970-1983

Year	Deliveries (Thousands)	Inventories (Thousands)	Hauling Capacities (Thousands of Tons)
1970	157	1,136	3,327
1971	169	1,168	3,527
1972	188	1,232	3,794
1973	224	1,276	3,894
1974	250	1,336	4,166
1975	269	1,396	4,446
1976	269	1,442	4,737
1977	268	1,501	5,051
1978	270	1,528	5,256
1979	267	1,568	5,576
1980	268	1,596	5,828
1981	268	1,653	6,263
1982	268	1,699	6,626
1983	NA	1,750	NA

Statistics for 1970-81 are from Narodnoye khozyaystvo SSSR, annual editions 1970-1981, (Moscow, 1971-1982). Statistics for 1982 are from SSSR v tsifrakh v 1982 godu (Moscow, 1983), p. 126. Statistics for 1983 inventories are from Ekonomika sel'skogo khozyaystva, No. 3, 1984, p. 10.

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